

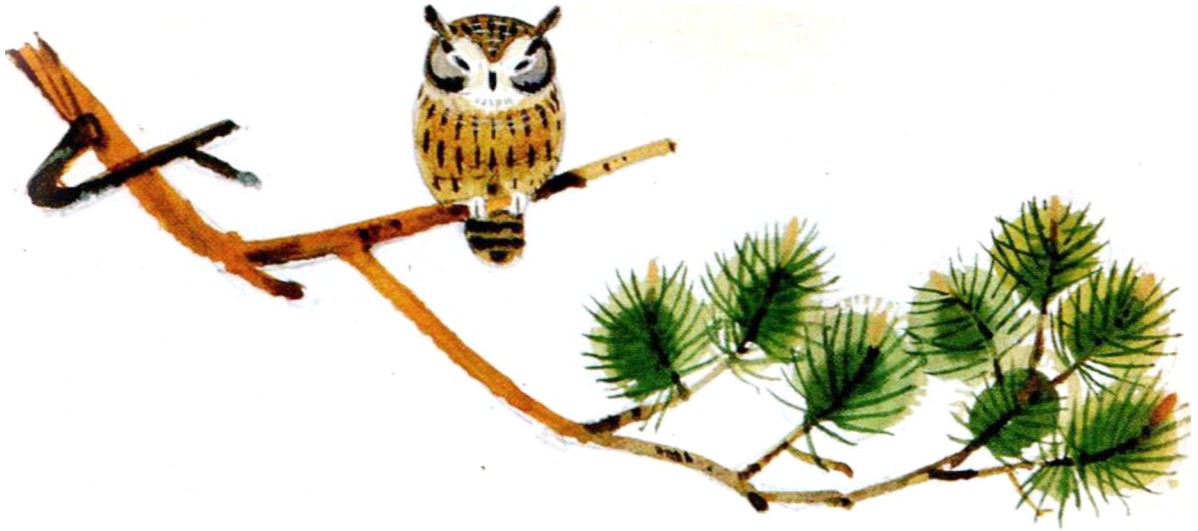


Yuri Arakcheyev

PLANTS AND ANIMALS OF THE TAIGA

Malysh Publishers





THE TAIGA

The Soviet Far East is a vast land with lots of marshy forests known as taiga. The trees in the taiga grow so closely together that they are almost like a solid wall. Great tall trees tower above smaller ones, and beneath them there is shrubbery. Patches of green can be seen between the trees and the shrubs. There is a lot of fern. Its broad tooth-edged leaves look like the feathers of some huge green bird. And whenever a beast of the forest creeps furtively beneath them, they gently sway.

How wonderful the air of the taiga is! Just breath it in and you will know the time of year, for every season, even every month, has its special smells. The cedar and silver fir conifers, the leaves of the birch, maple, linden, Amur velvet and Manchurian walnut—each has its own fragrance. Some taiga grasses, the fern for instance, are strongly scented; while the perfume of the taiga flowers is so delicate that it can hardly be sensed at all.

The taiga I am going to tell you about is the Ussuri taiga, which takes its name from the great Ussuri river flowing through the Far East of the Soviet Union.

THE CEDAR

The cedar is a tall and beautiful tree. Its trunk is thick and straight, and its shaggy branches are a mass of needles. Whatever the season, spring or summer, autumn or winter, the cedar's branches are always green. Its needles smell like tar. If you have a cold and walk for a while in a cedar forest, you will find that the cold will go away. Germs cannot stand the smell of conifers.

The cedar lives a long time. There are some trees that are four and even five hundred years old. Long before we were born, those cedars were standing where they are now. They must have seen a lot. Countless winters followed by countless springs, and all that time they have stood with their great branches swaying in the wind. And what typhoons they must have seen! "Typhoon" is a Chinese word meaning "big wind". Yet it is more than a very strong wind, it is a wind with stormy rainfall, too. At times typhoons cause terrible floods. Sometimes lightning strikes a tree and starts a fire in the taiga.

But look at these huge cedars—they have survived it all! Typhoons, lightning, and fire. And yet there they stand, their branches quivering in the breeze.

Although they are very old, the cedars do not seem to age. Their needles are fresh and green.

Large cones grow on the cedar's upper branches. In autumn nuts ripen in the cones.

Cedar nuts are very tasty and good for one's health. They also smell a little bit like tar.

When the cedar nuts ripen, villagers go to the forest to gather the cones. And it is not only people who like cedar nuts. Animals of the taiga like them too. But it is the Siberian nutcracker that likes them best of all.





THE SIBERIAN NUTCRACKER

The Siberian nutcracker is about the size of a pigeon, though its bill is a little longer than the pigeon's and is very hard. Its breast is speckled. The bird hulls the cones with its strong bill and puts the nuts under its tongue, where there is a special little bag for them. When it has gathered a dozen or so nuts, it does not eat them but flies away and hides them somewhere in the grass away from prying eyes. It puts them into a hole, then covers them with moss and leaves, and sometimes it even scatters a little earth around. The bird puts the nuts by for winter, for a rainy day, as they say.

Many dislike the nutcracker because it takes a lot of nuts from the cedar. But foresters like the bird very much indeed. It is this bird that plants new cedars, doing the forester's job for him. This is how it happens.

Sometimes the nutcracker forgets where it has hidden nuts. These lost nuts then sprout in the ground; after all, they are nothing other than cedar seeds. The nuts hidden by the bird will grow into new cedars. That is how the nutcracker plants trees and thus helps the forester.



THE TREES

Another tree that is quite common in the Ussuri taiga is the silver fir. It is also very tall—as high as a ten-storey building. And its needles, too, are green, both in winter and in summer. The silver fir tree is like the fir, but its needles are very soft. Its cones are long, just like those of the fir tree, but they are smaller than the fir's. There are seeds in the cones too. Some birds like the seeds of the silver fir. Squirrels also like them.

Birch trees grow in the taiga. There are different types—with white, black or yellow bark. They are named after the colour of their bark: the white, the black, and the yellow birches. The bark of the birch tree peels off, except that of the yellow birch, which dries up and falls off the tree. Just like the skin of an onion.

The so called “stone birch” also grows in the taiga. Its wood is as hard as stone. It is so heavy that it sinks in water. The bark of the stone birch also peels off the trunk and hangs in thin strips, like rags.

But the hardest of the birches is the iron birch. Its wood is so hard that it is even used for making tools. Just like iron.

Maple, poplar and ash grow in the taiga too, as do the linden, the larch, the fir and the oak.

The Amur velvet is a very interesting tree. Its bark is very thick and is silky to the touch. It is also known as the Amur cork tree because bottle corks, floats for fishermen's nets, and lifebelts are made of its thick bark. The Amur cork tree lives for a long time, sometimes for three hundred years.

The elm is one of the tallest and most beautiful trees in the Ussuri taiga. Its straight, smooth trunk rises into the sky like a column. Elms, too, can live for several hundred years.



THE GINSENG

There are many wonders hidden in the taiga. Now what sort of a plant is this?

Several tooth-edged leaves on long stems, and the stalk growing straight up out of the ground. Each stem has five leaves, like the five fingers of a man's hand. And in the ground the plant has a root that looks like a tiny man. It has its head, neck, arms and legs. This plant is called the ginseng.



But the most wonderful thing about it is that the root is the best medicine in the world. The ginseng will cure nearly all diseases. That is why people also call it the "life root".

The ginseng grows in the depths of the taiga. Yet people manage to find it. They search for it in autumn, when its fruits ripen. They are scarlet berries, which grow in a cluster. You can see them from far away.

The ginseng is becoming rarer and rarer in the taiga. The "life root" grows very slowly. It lives for tens, and even hundreds of years. In late autumn its leaves become dry and fall off. The man-shaped root stays in the ground through winter, and in spring new leaves sprout. In summer the ginseng comes into bloom, and in autumn its berries ripen again.

Foresters know the places where the ginseng grows. Every autumn they gather its berries and scatter them around so that new "life roots" will grow. The ginseng berries contain seeds.



THE CHINESE VINE

The Chinese vine is another wonderful plant of the Ussuri taiga.

It is neither a tree nor a shrub. It is very long and thin like a rope. The Chinese vine winds itself around the trunks of trees.

Twining plants with supple stems, like the Chinese vine, are called lianes. They always grow next to trees so that they can climb up their trunks towards light and sunshine.

The Chinese vine has oval, light-green leaves with pointed edges. The leaves smell of lemon. Its flowers are pink, and you can almost see through them. It is as if they were made of porcelain. They grow in clusters, and they also smell of lemon. The berries of the Chinese vine are orange-red and look like red currants. They smell and taste of lemon too, but they are sour and a bit bitter.

If you eat just a few of the berries and chew their pips, you will feel renewed.



THE MANCHURIAN DEER

In spring, when the snow melts and everything is covered with water, or after a typhoon, the rivers of the taiga overflow. In summer and in autumn the rivers become narrow like a brook. Then you can follow the course of a river by walking along its bed, stepping from one stone to another.

Manchurian deer are very big animals. The stag is the biggest and most beautiful animal with huge antlers that look like branches. He grazes on the river bank munching leaves off the bushes and looking after the little ones and the doe. From time to time he raises his big head and stiffens. He watches intently, and listens to every sound. His nostrils twitch as he sniffs the air. What if the tiger, the master of the taiga, were to crawl near and hide somewhere in the riverside thickets? You could expect no good of him! A leap! And one of the family could find itself in the claws of this striped predator. That is why the Manchurian deer is always on his guard.

But if you walk very, very quietly, and the wind is blowing in your direction, you can get rather close to these wonderful animals. How slender and beautiful they are! No wonder, the Manchurian deer is sometimes called the noble deer.





THE TIGER

Only rarely will you meet a tiger in the Ussuri forest. But it can happen. Walking along a narrow track you see him coming out from amongst the fern thickets. His whiskers bristle, and the end of his long tail sways to and fro like any other cat's.

But what should you do?

Seasoned foresters and hunters quickly climb up a tree. The tiger stands still for a while, and then goes back into the thickets.

Sometimes you do not see the tiger, you just hear him, the mighty roar of the master of the forest. If you hear the tiger's growl, do not panic, and do not run away. Stand very still for a moment, and then turn back to where you have come from.

The tiger will never attack a man for no good reason.

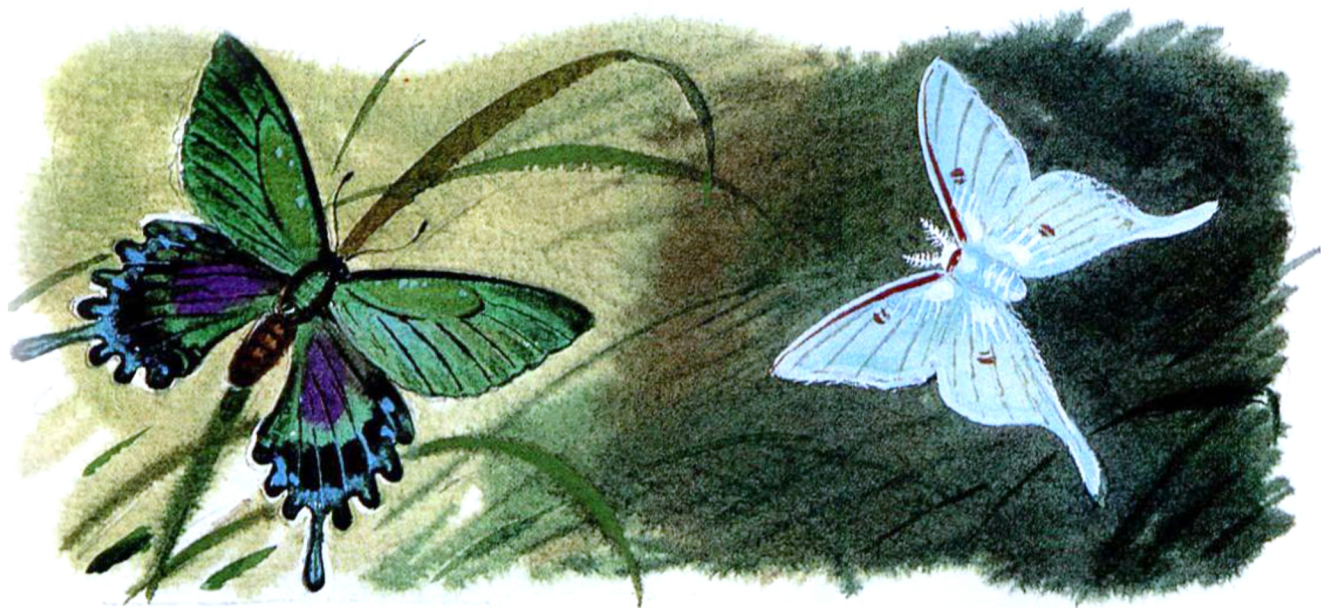
THE FLOWERS

There are so many flowers in the taiga! All sorts of them can be found in the glades and meadows: orange-red lilies spotted black, scarlet flaming poppies, violet irises, carnations, bluebells, camomiles; you could never count them all!



THE BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies—“flying flowers”—dance over the real flowers, over the forest roads, between the trees—like leaves of every



colour. White, yellow, red, blue, green—there are so many of them in the taiga!

But the most beautiful of them is the blue machaon. As big as a bird, it flies as high as the tree tops, then comes down and settles on the flowers of the river bank, or on the road, where there are puddles of water after the rain. Blue machaons like water very much. On a hot day, lots of them will gather at a puddle to drink water with their long proboscises. If, by chance, you frighten them away—they fly up and flutter through the air. Their wings seem to change colour in the sun, now blue, now green...

At nightfall, moths appear in the forest. Some are big and beautiful. Hosts of them fly towards the lights in the village and beat against the windows. They are also fascinated by the light of the fire. The artemis moth is very beautiful. It has greenish wings covered with tiny silky hairs. Each wing has a round spot on it—they look like eyes. The back wings have long tails.

THE LOTUS

This beautiful flower blooms in August on the taiga lakes. It is a big pink flower, and it rises above the water with its petals reaching in every direction like rays. It seems to give out warmth in the sunshine—every petal breathing with light and life...



THE SONG OF THE USSURI TAIGA

The rivers in the taiga make a lot of noise, and the little brooks babble. The trees rustle in the wind.

The cracking of dry branches is heard as a bear forces his way through the thickets. A twig snaps, and a stone sounds beneath the cautious step of a deer.

A tiger will pass through the thickets noiselessly.

And from early morning till late night, the birds joyfully sing their different songs.

But the taiga is noisiest when a typhoon starts blowing. It whistles and roars, and the wind's terrifying song is filled with groaning. It is the trees bending and creaking in the wind. Some of them topple over under the force of the wind, and then a dreadful dull cracking is heard. An old giant of the forest falls with a crash. It starts raining, then pouring, harder and harder. A wild stream catches the trunks of dead trees and carries them away, rumbling, grinding them and crushing them against one another.

Suddenly the wind dies down, the rain stops, and now only the tinkling of dripping water can be heard. A mist envelops the forest. The clouds drift away and the sun comes out again. Gradually the water level drops, leaving the dead trunks on the stony river banks.

Once again, the birds start singing, and the river flows quietly by. Somewhere amongst the trees the brook murmurs, and the branches rustle in the breeze.

Again the bear, who has waited for the typhoon to be over in some comfortable spot, crashes through the thickets. A family of Manchurian deer is grazing on the river bank while a tiger noiselessly steals up on them...

How beautiful the unending song of the Ussuri taiga is!



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Illustrated by V. Fedotov

Translated by Bruce Hamilton

Malysk Publishers
Moscow

Printed in the USSR

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